

The Stupid Stick

By Pedro Vera



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All I wanted to do was to take the civil service entrance test. I could have waited until I actually got kicked out of school, or I could have been proactive and start my next move ahead of the program. I knew so many dumb people working for the federal government that I thought it would be a piece of cake to nail a job. It would

not be much but it would give me a job security that none of my college classmates would ever hope of having.

Boy was I wrong.

The first thing that happened was that I went to take the test on the wrong date. I knew I was wrong when I walked into the classroom (atop the old post office) and found myself staring at the shortest, skinniest man I have ever seen wearing a US Army uniform. Like all little guys, this one was gutsy and pushy. It took a minute to explain that I had walked into the ASVAB, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, sort of a SAT for people that want to enlist in the military. We talked for about five minutes and he convinced me to come back in a week to take that test instead of the Civil Service test.

No commitment. Yeah right.

Looking back, that exact moment is what every military recruit in the country calls the moment the recruiter sneaked behind him and hit him with the stupid stick. Depending on how hard it hits, you may not wake up until right after you are sworn-in. Some, like me, did not wake up until after the first buzz cut.

But that's ahead of the story.

The thing is, I nailed the ASVAB. And this was in Puerto Rico, which means English was my second language but

I still managed to nail the test in English. There is a little known rule for recruiting candidates that are not native speakers. Basically, whatever they score in the ASVAB is multiplied by two. A Spanish-speaker scores 50% and is treated as well as if she aced it.

This is important, because recruiting is a sales organization, and it has quotas. They must recruit X candidates that score high enough, because all armed services are highly technical and require smart young people to work for them. The days of the dumbass high school dropout are over man.

Candidates that score above a certain cutoff are called "alpha" recruits, and count as twice the quota points as the rest of the candidates. Remember, this is a sales operation, so if things are hurting, at the end of the month it pays to nail a couple alphas to round-up the quota.

This is why my recruiter did not ask me to take the test on the spot. Once I told him I was an engineering student he decided to keep me for the end of the month in case his quota was hurting.

Before I enlisted I was driven across the island (I was in Mayaguez, which is in the west coast) to San Juan, to the Military Entrance Processing Station, or MEPS. MEPS

was a neat little paper shuffling operation. You feed young kids thru one door and they come out of the other end of the building already sworn into a military service. Your ASVAB scores are reviewed, then you take a physical and psychological evaluation, fill a million forms and then sit and chill until the career counselors figure out where to send you.

The round peg into the round hole.

This is when things proved difficult. First, the doctor did not want to pass me because I had asthma as a kid (the sonofabitch was right, 3 years into the enlistment the asthma came back with a vengeance and eventually ended up getting a medical discharge). Here is the kicker: everybody got mad at me for saying I had asthma as a kid. Seems I was not briefed about the things I was supposed to lie about!

Whatever. The doc had to call the hospital where I used to be treated as a kid, and they sort of proved that I had not suffered asthma for at least 10 years. It also helped that for as long as I was in college I biked 30-50Km per day, and 100Km/day on weekends, and I was not a smoker so my lungs were in outstanding shape.

Then I screwed up the system.

Once you are done with all the testing, you are given "the pitch." Your scores are matched to open job positions Army-wide. You are offered two or three technical jobs, plus any of the combat arms (infantry, armor, artillery), since these are always open. You are expected to pick one on the spot and that is it.

Not me.

I was offered a bullshit data entry job, some bullshit warehousing job plus of course, infantry, armor or artillery. I said fuck no.

Then the shit hit the fan. The career counselor literally shit a brick. He called me names for half an hour and acted like he was offended that I did not find any of the jobs worth it. I explained I was an engineering student, I was not going to wear the uniform just to be a goddamn typist. Neither would I sign up just to work a warehouse.

"What about combat arms?" He asked.

"Not in a million years," I replied.

That's the nice thing about all this happening before the swear-in ceremony, I did not owe them shit.

They sent me back to the waiting room, so we played dominoes for about three hours and tried to practice our English. There was a little scam going on with the whole

English-proficiency issue: people were flunking the English proficiency test (I aced mine with no effort whatsoever) just so they would be sent to Lackland US Air Force Base in Texas, where they had the joint ESL (English as a Second Language) school. People would go there for 2-3 months to learn English and fuck around, then flunk out of the course so they would not be sent to basic training. End result: they would get paid to fuck around and learn to speak English.

I could not give a shit: I was bilingual already. My friends flunked the test, so they had to go to Lackland before even starting basic.

We had to speak in English while playing dominoes because one of the guys was from the Virgin Islands and he could not speak Spanish. It surprised me that I had no trouble whatsoever understanding him. I guess the 16 years of English in school and college paid off.

After 3 hours the career counselor, still pissed, came to fetch me.

"Wait til you see the job I found for you. You either take that fucking job or I'll kick your ass so hard you'll land at Fort Benning."

I followed him and listened to his pitch. The Army offered me to train as a satellite communications

technician, which meant that after 9 weeks of basic training I would go to school for about 12 months.

The way I saw it, they wanted to pay me to teach me how to fix expensive electronic gadgets.

I took the job.

Because the school is so long, it starts every 2 months or so. That meant I had to wait a bit so my graduation date for basic training would match the beginning of the advanced training. This delay is called the Delayed Entry Program.

After a month or so of DEP, I was driven back to MEPS for another physical and a terrifying interview with an intelligence guy. This guy made me outline everything I had done since I was 16 years old.

Once convinced I was not a terrorist trying to sneak into the Army to wreck havoc, I was sworn in with about a dozen more people. Then they drove us to a barracks building in the Sabana Seca Navy Base (now dismantled) and the next morning they drove us to the airport.

I left the island with a small bag with underwear for five days and a paperback.

I was sure I would freak out the second the plane took off, but the only thing that startled me was the sense of acceleration when the airplane starts the takeoff roll. We

were flown to Columbia, South Carolina. Destination: Fort Jackson.

Here is one of the dirty tricks they play on you: all flights and bus trips are timed so you will arrive at Fort Jackson around one in the morning. And, this being the Army, we had to be up by 4:30 AM.

We were told the old line about giving our hearts to Jesus because our asses belonged to the US Army. We were also read the proper passages off the Unified Code of Military Justice that covered things like recruits mouthing off at superiors, running away, etc.

We were taken to modern buildings with 60-man bays, where we all slept in bunker beds. Each building held a company (240 men or women, no co-ed training back in 1992) with an orderly room on the ground floor.

At 4:40 AM we were herded (we did not know how to march yet, so we looked just like a herd of sheep, baaaah) into the chow hall, which looked like a very nice college cafeteria. The flags of all states and possessions were hanging from the tall ceiling, and when I saw the Puerto Rican flag with its lone shining star my eyes actually watered.

The breakfast was great; I always heard the food in the Army was bad, so I thought maybe it was a way to throw us off balance before the real deal started.

And check this out: no drill sergeants in sight. We were marched around by a buck sergeant.

Over the next week we went thru the assembly line. We got issued uniforms (only battle dress uniforms, or BDUs. We would not get the nice stuff until we survived half the program), boots, eyeglasses, etc. We signed millions of forms in triplicate. And God forbid your job required a security clearance.

If that is the case, you won't even make it into the graduation book. They will make sure that you "miss" the photo session because while your buddies are getting their pictures taken, you are being grilled by military intelligence officers.

Eventually they give you \$50 to buy toiletries, after threatening you if you even think of trying to sneak candy, cigarettes or drugs into the barracks.

After the week we were used to the whole mess, which is what they wanted. They made us throw a GI Party, which means everybody is allowed to pitch in and help sterilize the barracks. It has to be good enough for a hospital,

because if you miss the inspection you will have to clean it all over.

After our sergeant stated that the barracks were almost clean, we were told to pack our new uniforms and to head downstairs.

The drill sergeants were waiting for us.

They lined us up, then made us show them our dog tags and ID card, because there was always one dumbass that did not know how his own name was spelled.

Here I joined another shit list, but this one by accident. A drill sergeant, a tall skinny guy wearing BCD glasses (the military issue eyeglasses are called "Birth Control Devices" because they are so ugly that they keep you from ever getting laid) asked me where I came from and why I was a PFC (Private First Class) instead of a buck private. I explained I got the promotion because I had gone thru college. Had I graduated I could have gone straight to officer school, and if I had still decided for enlisted status I would have gotten the next higher rank, Specialist.

Drill sergeants fucking hate fucking college boys that think they are fucking special because they went to fucking college.

You get the idea.

After they checked everybody, they made us throw our duffle bags into the back of a couple small cattle trucks then told us to hop into grey-painted Army school buses.

They drove us around to confuse us, and then told us we were about to arrive. The bus did not stop in front of our barracks, instead it stopped about 100 yards before.

"GET OFF MY FUCKING BUS!"

In the 15 seconds it took me to make it to the door I noticed what was happening to the people that were not showing the proper degree of enthusiasm after leaving the bus: pushups. And screaming. Lots of both.

I jumped off the bus and ran for my life. I knew I was safe when I started overtaking a few people. By then the adrenaline had kicked in and my brain was in high gear. I could see the drill sergeants were ganging up on people. They would go, two at a time, and pick on one guy. Each would scream at him contradicting orders, which would confuse the poor little shit to no end.

I also noticed there was some order in the middle of the chaos. We (all 260 of us) were running in droves toward the front of Bravo Company, 2nd battalion of the 39th Infantry Regiment. The area in front of the building was a cement sidewalk marked with grooves into a grid with one-yard squares. I noticed how the drill sergeants were

shoving the recruits into position by making them stand on the top right corner of a square.

I also noticed that the drill sergeant that had asked me about my rank was shoving all the fat kids (everyone except for a few looked fresh out of high school) out of our platoon, and replacing them with skinnier kids. By the way, it was August 19, 1992 and it was already horribly hot.

After we were more or less arranged into four platoons, the fun began. First we were instructed, by screaming so close that the spit hit our faces, that we were to run upstairs to get a room assigned, locate a pistol belt, canteen and canteen holder which was left for us in each locker, and then run downstairs. We had one minute to do this.

I bolted for the door. I knew that if I did not jump ahead it would totally suck and we all would get stuck in the stairwells. I made it up, found the room and got the gear.

I was one of the first to make it back downstairs, and I was already late. That cost me 10 pushups.

Once they had everyone downstairs, they told us to look behind us. They had placed four lister bags on wooden frames made out of railroad ties. Lister bags are

waterproof canvas bags that have 8 spouts in the bottom. They are used to purify and deliver water out in the field.

We were given 120 seconds to run (not walk) to the closest lister bag, fill the canteen, drink it, then fill it again and run back to our assigned square. Again I predicted the traffic jam effect, so I bolted ahead and managed to grab one of the spouts. Once I drank the full canteen, which was not a problem since it was so hot, I elbowed my way back to a faucet to refill the canteen.

This time people started to drag ass, so quite a few got stuck paying for the delay with push-ups. More fun: we were told to drink the second canteen, right on the spot.

I thought, if I screw this up I'll end up doing pushups, so I managed to drink it all. We were given one minute to down this second canteen. After we were done we were ordered to uncap the canteen and put it over our heads, upside down.

Anyone that got soaked (there were quite a few) got to do even more pushups: for disobeying orders. Now properly hydrated, we were ordered to find our duffle bag and to bring it back to our square. Here's the kicker: we had to fish out one duffle bag from four stacks of 60 bags each. All identical except for some black stencil lettering with

last name, first name and last four digits of our social security number.

After that came more screaming, more running up and down the stairs, the usual. Once we were exhausted, they broke us down into platoons and took us into classrooms for even more paperwork. We were assigned three drill sergeants, a Sergeant First Class who would act as platoon sergeant, and two staff sergeants that would be the assistant drill sergeants.

The platoon sergeant kept staring at me, the last thing I wanted in the world! All I wanted was to blend into the background and hide from the guy for 8 weeks. Every 5 minutes he would stare at me.

Eventually he ordered me to take off my eyeglasses. I was wearing Ray Ban wire rim frame eyeglasses, for some reason I was never issued BCD's during in-processing. After getting tired of watching me squinting to read the blackboard, he let me put them on again.

Then he kept staring at me.

Then he said: "I've been trying for the last hour to figure out who the hell you look like. You look like fucking Mahatma fucking Gandhi! From now on your name is Private First Class Gandhi!"

All I could reply was "YES DRILL SERGEANT."

It took me a second to figure it out. I was 6'1" and weighted maybe 170 pounds. I was well tanned thanks to the beaches in Puerto Rico plus the daily bike rides. And I just had my head nearly shaved less than a week before when I arrived at Fort Jackson. On top of that, I was wearing round wire rim eyeglasses, so in fact I did look almost like Mahatma Gandhi!

You could argue that this was racial and they were mocking the Latin guy, but I had the dubious honor of being the only one in my platoon that got a nickname just because of his looks and not because of his fuckups. Everybody else got a nickname too, but only after screwing something up.

I was PFC Gandhi all thru basic training. The second I left Fort Jackson for my advanced training in Georgia I lost the nickname.

The End

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